



The Episcopal Church
The Diocese of Georgia

The Office of the Right Reverend Frank Logue, Bishop of Georgia

Friday, May 14th 2021

Dear Clergy and Wardens of the Diocese of Georgia,

You will have heard the hopeful news that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued a statement yesterday stating that, “fully vaccinated people no longer need to wear a mask or physically distance in any setting” and then adding some caveats. At the time of this announcement, less than 29% of Georgia residents were fully vaccinated. No one ages 12-15 has had sufficient time to get fully vaccinated, no one under 12 has been cleared to receive a vaccine at all, and many of those 16 and over have decided to not yet get the vaccine at this time.

When I announced the revised COVID-19 guidance that will go into effect on May 17, I wrote that when the CDC changed its guidance on masks and distancing we would adjust accordingly. We are moving toward those who are vaccinated being encouraged, but not required, to practice masking and distancing. We are not, however, at that point today. 7 in 10 Georgians remain without the vaccine. By requiring only the unvaccinated to wear masks, we single them out for decisions over which they may not have control, or we inadvertently encourage them to 'fit in' by not wearing a mask even though they remain unvaccinated, thereby increasing risk for everyone. The command to love our neighbors, including safeguarding their health, simply outweighs our understandable desire to return to what we knew as normal.

While I have read this newest CDC announcement in full, as of this morning the CDC has yet to revise their guidance for Communities of Faith based on this change. The new CDC announcement is welcome news for us as individuals, but it is also a challenge for communities of faith because, as followers of Jesus, we welcome all people, not just those who are fully vaccinated. The CDC is clear that indoor gatherings, including church services, remain a risk for the unvaccinated. This may seem like a small point, but it can have a great impact. Our May 17 guidance allows us to sing indoors while we are masked and distanced from other households. But I am deeply concerned about what it will mean for us to sing with no masks and no distancing with unvaccinated persons among us, especially children. While some congregations do not have children present on a regular basis, that is to be lamented rather than seen as a cause to move to worship that would mitigate risk less for the generations that will follow. In addition, even the CDC's newly announced guidelines name concerns for people who have underlying health conditions or are taking medications that weaken the immune system. I am concerned about what any change means for those who are immunocompromised.

I am revising the guidance that would have gone into effect on May 17 to make it effective today. In it I *encourage* those who are fully vaccinated to practice masking and distancing at all liturgies. These practices are *not required* of those who are fully vaccinated for any liturgies that take place outdoors, but are still required for indoor liturgies. Please note that some communities in the diocese may still have mask mandates in effect and congregations in those areas must follow the law in those instances. I do know this puts you as leaders in a difficult position as you will likely have people show up for worship this Sunday with no masks and every idea that they are doing rightly, and you will need to show grace and love. I hope we are not in limbo for long.

In order to gain greater clarity, I am working with our established network available through The Episcopal Church to get counsel from public health experts on indoor gatherings with a mix of those vaccinated and unvaccinated. In addition, I will be taking the opportunity to discuss this situation with Clergy during next week's Clergy Retreat. Senior Wardens and Clergy who will not be present at Honey Creek may write to me at bishop@gaepiscopal.org with any feedback as well.

Unlike my last notice that anticipated no changes in the immediate future (funny how life is like that), I do hope to have more revisions soon based on this input.

Pax et bonum,
+Frank